

Sunday 25th January 2026

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul

Hymn 237 We sing the glorious conquest

Tune: Ellacombe

The Collect

Almighty God, who caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world through the preaching of your servant Saint Paul: grant that we who celebrate his wonderful conversion may follow him in bearing witness to your truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Acts 9:1-22

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank. ¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" ²² Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

Hymn 600 Thou art the Way

Tune: St James

Matthew 19:23-30

Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." ²⁷ Then Peter said in reply, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" ²⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my name's sake will

receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

The Sermon

Two of my favourite activities: solving cryptic crosswords and watching detective stories on TV – Vera, Shetland, Dalziel and Pascoe, Lynley, Morse. I doesn't matter if I've seen them before, because I can never remember how they end. But both these activities have a lot in common with the conversion of St Paul, which we are celebrating today. You read a crossword clue, and sometimes the obvious answer just leaps out. It fits, you write it in. But then, when you try to put in an answer that crosses it, you find the letters don't work. The difficulty is getting the seemingly obvious answer out of your head, and that can be amazingly difficult. It's a bit like the moment in some detective programmes, where there is an obvious suspect – but they have an unbreakable alibi. It's the moment when the chief detective says, "Hang on – maybe we're looking at this completely the wrong way. What if...?"

I hope you have already worked out where I am heading with this. We know quite a bit about St Paul's character. The evidence is liberally sprinkled across the Acts of the Apostles and his own letters. Here are a few examples.

He was plain-speaking. "When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face" (Galatians 2:11)

He was tolerant. "Welcome those who are weak in the faith; let us no longer pass judgment on one another; we who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak" (Romans 14:1,13, 15:1)

He was emotional. "Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy" (2 Timothy 1:4)

He was a risk-taker. "The Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known. They were watching the gates night and day, but his disciples let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket" (Acts 9:23-25)

He was stubborn. "We urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. He answered, I am ready to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. Since he would not be persuaded, we remained silent, except to say, The Lord's will be done" (Acts 21:10-14)

He was crafty. "When he noticed that some were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, he called out, Brothers, I am on trial concerning the resurrection of the dead. When he said this, a dissension arose between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, and the assembly was divided" (Acts 23:6,7)

But perhaps more than anything, he was religious. "If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a pharisee; as to zeal, a prosecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." (Philippians 3:4-6)

Here we come to the heart of it. Saul, Paul, was religious. He was a Pharisee. They are a group who mostly don't get a very good press: "righteous," with its implied "self-righteous." But just put that idea, that crossword clue answer, out of your mind, and describe them instead as people who always wanted to do "the right thing" in conforming their lives to God's will as they found it expressed in the scriptures, the Bible, and especially in the Law of Moses. Is that such a bad thing?

As a highly educated Pharisee, Paul knew the scriptures from front to back. As a Pharisee he knew what misleading and dangerous claims were being made about this Jesus of Nazareth. But as a Pharisee he had accepted the possibility of resurrection. And as a Pharisee he wanted to do the right thing. He sets off from Jerusalem to Damascus, mulling all the scriptural evidence over in his mind.

And the moment comes when he looks at it again, and like the TV detective, asks himself, “What if...?” It gradually dawns on him, and then, in a flash, he sees the light.

You might say, “and the rest is history.” Paul is still a Pharisee; he must still do the right thing. But what or indeed who he has seen, what he now knows, understands, believes – in a word, “Jesus” - must now be proclaimed at all costs. That is the supreme right thing to do if God’s will is to be done.

Later, he describes to his companion and biographer, Luke, the reality of what happened to him on the road – the most profound spiritual, emotional and life-changing experience of his life. His conversion from “no way” to “what if?” and then, “Of course!” Jesus of Nazareth **is** God’s anointed, the Messiah, the Christ, the hope of Israel, the vanquisher of death. That is what Luke, writing the book we call the Acts of the Apostles, has to put into words. Not at all easy, but how wonderfully he does that, and how privileged we are to be given insight, to have a light shone for us into the mind of Christ’s greatest missionary, Paul, at his moment of inner enlightenment.

I wonder if it’s a question we might each ponder. What has been the most profound spiritual, emotional, life-changing experience of my life? How would I do it justice in words. So praise God for Luke the skilled narrator; praise God for Paul the dauntless missionary; praise God for Jesus the light of the world.

For our prayers

We pray with all who are sick, for their healing in accordance with God’s will, remembering Prue and Nancy, Christina Baldwin, Nigel Baty-Symes, Stuart Bell, Maggie Bennett, Daniel Bosman, Brenda Clark, Graeme Common, Nick Cook, Suzie Dent, Lorraine Dodd, Sue Hanning, Kathleen Lee, Heather Loughhead, Andrew McKendrick, Carol McKendrick, Kate Marris, Ned Ryan, Will Sadler, Elizabeth Sambell, Maureen Stevens and Elizabeth Wood.

We give thanks for the grace of God in the lives of Alec Rastall, and of Ronald Leslie Duncan, Kenneth Victor Trotter, Tom Walker, John Robert Oliver, Robert Purvis and John Angus Leybourne, whose year’s mind is about this time.

Hymn 277 All for Jesus

Tune: All for Jesus

The Prayer after Communion

Lord God, the source of truth and love, keep us faithful to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, united in prayer and the breaking of bread, and one in joy and simplicity of heart, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn 217 Glory to thee, O God

Tune: Love Unknown

For the week ahead

Peter said, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”

Measuring

Suppose you opened up enough to let in the sky and sun –
turned out the fusty room, chucked out hoarded priorities –
there might be room for unexpected, overwhelming joy!

Well, suppose one millimetre –
that might even be enough to start a crack,
it’s said one snowflake starts an avalanche.

Dangerous you say?
Giving uncalculated goods?
Unweighed? Uncosted?

It's a risk, of course they might be wasted;
though on the other hand
an unaccountable joy could be an unsought compensation.
Scales balancing all you give
leave no margin for ecstasy.

Cecily Taylor

Next Sunday: 1st February 2026

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Bible readings

Malachi 3:1-5

A prophecy combining promise, fulfilment and judgement.

Luke 2:22-40

Mary and Joseph present their child to God in accordance with the Law of Moses

There will be an informal meeting of PCC members next Sunday, immediately after the service. This will be to give an update on the present state of discussions about what may happen after Andrew's retirement. It will not be a long meeting.

Ash Wednesday: 18th February

To mark the beginning of Lent there will be a service of hymns, readings and prayers in St Helen's at 6.00 p.m. with music led by St Mary's Choir and their director and organist, Paul Berry.